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ABSTRACT

Accountability in career counseling is receiving increased attention. However, few organizations have specific guidelines for the delivery of career counseling. This digest describes a workbook, developed in Canada, which furnishes a practical, evaluative approach for support organizations that provide career counseling services. The procedures in the workbook are developmental and concentrate on supporting organizational and staff growth. The spirit of the workbook is to demystify policy formulation. It is designed in two parts: Part One addresses policy development, and Part Two looks at staff development. Each part begins with a self-assessment. In areas where the assessments indicate room for improvement, staff are guided step-by-step through suggested procedures for decisions. Part One focuses on policy development for the external delivery of services, whereas Part Two concentrates on human resource planning practices. Both parts promote a respect for career development of all players in an organization. Recognizing that most organizations have resource constraints, the workbook provides a framework for understanding and prioritizing critical factors in service quality. It also strongly advocates a concentration on client and service outcomes. Field tests of the workbook helped organizations identify areas in which they needed help and areas in which they were solid. (RJM)

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"Quality Career Counseling Services" A Developmental Tool For Organizational Accountability

Lynne Bezanon

Overview

Accountability in career counseling is receiving increased attention. The general public is becoming more informed about what to expect from career counseling service providers and, as a consequence, more critical. Funders also are becoming more insistent about accountability and quality assurance. These factors are increasing the pressure on counseling agencies to have policies, standards, and benchmarks for service which "customers" can understand so that they can make comparisons and judgments as to what services to select. However, few organizations have any guidelines specific to the delivery of career counseling and very few practical tools exist to help organizations who want to pay attention to creating better standards in career counseling.

To fill this void, the idea emerged of creating a developmental procedure for organizations and/or individuals to "do it themselves." The vision was to develop a tool that would be sufficiently generic to be useful in many jurisdictions and, at the same time, sufficiently specific so that it would provide a structure for examining standards and quality of service for a range of career counseling services.

Policy Workbook - an Innovative Resource

The "tool" which evolved is entitled "Quality Career Counselling Services - A Policy Workbook." The Workbook takes an innovative approach to policies and standards. The procedures recommended are developmental and they concentrate on supporting organizational and staff growth. Quality of service (a more user-friendly name for policies and standards) is portrayed as requiring input from all levels of an organization. It does not just come from "up there," where policy often is seen to reside. The spirit of the workbook is to demystify policy formulation and use policies and standards to support self-initiated processes for quality development and change.

Quality of service in career counseling presents the experiences of the consumers of career counseling services, as well as the experiences of the staff when attending to their own career development needs. Organizations are encouraged to consider that quality career counseling services are best delivered by staff who see their

own careers as personally meaningful and important to the organization. It is in the organization's best interests to attend to both dimensions of service (consumer and staff).

The Workbook is designed in two parts: Part One addresses policy development and Part Two addresses staff development. Each part begins with a self-assessment. In areas where the assessments indicate room for improvement, staff are guided step-by-step through suggested procedures for decisions, defining outcome statements, and clarifying plans of action. It is suggested that the assessments and subsequent work be completed in full staff meetings or in time set aside for appropriate working groups. Times for each discussion range from 30-60 minutes and can be spread out over several weeks if necessary. The guided discussions cover eight areas critical to quality of service:

- *Organizational mandate:* Is it clear? Does it define the consumers, their needs, outcomes achieved, and the values which guide service delivery?
- *Service offered:* Is there a clear specification of services provided and not provided?
- *Service standards:* A guided examination of key areas such as wait times, case loads, service coordination, service continuity.
- *Mechanism for ensuring well-informed clients:* How are clients informed of the services and what can they reasonably expect to receive?
- *Provider competence:* Are there procedures to inventory competence at all staff levels? Are there standards for supervision?
- *Professional behavior:* Are standards of professional conduct in place and well known?
- *Management practices review:* A guide for examining the completeness of existing practices.
- *Accountability statement:* Assists in proving the worth of what you do, how to do it, and by whom.

Part One focuses on policy development for the external delivery of services. An assumption in Part One is that consumers evaluate the services they receive on the basis of how satisfied they are, the degree to which their

expectations are met, the reliability of the services over time, and the results they achieve. Organizations which have in place policies and standards in each of the eight areas covered in Part One have a foundation which supports clients who experience these conditions and who evaluate services positively.

Part Two focuses on human resource planning practices. Staff skills are the basis for quality service; therefore, staff career development and planning at all levels of the organization is the focus. Guidelines are provided for the following types of critical questions:

- Do staff at all levels (support, counselor, supervisor, manager) have the skills and resources necessary to deliver services to clients at the standards established in Part One?
- Do staff at all levels attend to their own career development, and have a plan of action to acquire skills for their next career step?

The activities associated with each critical question lead to a staff development plan, which includes a procedure for organizing appropriate supervision.

Parts One and Two are connected in two important ways. First, conceptually and philosophically, the procedures and processes promote a respect for the career development of all players in an organization. Second, in Part One, users develop a series of policy statements and standards of practice; then in Part Two, they develop achievable action plans to equip staff to deliver service to the standards defined in Part One.

The Workbook was field-tested in several jurisdictions, including education, guidance, professional associations, boards of directors, rehabilitation, social services, and the YMCA. Without exception, all reported that the Workbook assisted them in identifying areas in need of attention, and recognizing areas that already were solid.

Conclusion

The Workbook furnishes a practical approach for support organizations who want to provide the best possible career counseling services. Recognizing that most organizations have resource constraints, the Workbook provides a framework for understanding and prioritizing critical factors in service quality. For instance, it suggests a shift from "service provision" to "meeting client expectations." It also strongly advocates a concentration on client and service outcomes. Providing career counseling agencies with the tools to define and develop their own quality standards, represents a new approach to improving service quality and to meeting increasing expectations.

References

- Riddle, D. I., & Bezanson, M. L. (1994). *Quality Career Counselling Services: A Policy Workbook*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Guidance and Counselling Foundation.

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